

A Picture of Health

In Public Health we look at the way people in Tameside live as a whole population. This helps us understand what the main health and wellbeing challenges are for people living here, so we can look for ways to improve levels of health. We'll be sharing facts and figures about health in Tameside with you every month, to put you in the picture. We'll also be giving you information on how you can help yourself and the people around you to live well.

In focus this month: Loneliness and Older People

1 Before we share the facts, what do we mean when we talk about loneliness? It's not simply being alone or not being alone. What one person experiences as loneliness, another may enjoy as peace and quiet. So why the difference? Loneliness is a feeling we experience when we don't have as much social contact, or as many of the right type of relationships as we would like to have in our life. It may be that we are missing that special someone, we don't see our friends as often as we like, or perhaps the friends we have aren't on our wavelength any more. It's more about how a person feels about their situation than the situation itself, so it's a bit like the saying about beauty; loneliness is in the eye of the beholder.



2 As a species, human beings are social animals. We naturally crave companionship and the emotional safety and stability we get from being part of a group. Feeling lonely on occasion is normal, and even has a useful purpose. Think of it as nature's way of reminding us that we're better when we're together. It tells us to find our way back to the fold. It's ok in short doses, but feeling emotionally lonely for a prolonged period of time can be harmful. If you or someone you know feel lonely have a look at some practical ways you can do something about it.



3 Chronic emotional loneliness can affect mental health. It has been linked to stress, anxiety and depression, as well as having a detrimental effect on self-confidence. What fewer people realise is that it also has a physical impact on our bodies. It creates an effect that is similar to stress, for example it can increase your blood pressure, which in itself brings health risks.



4 Evidence tells us that loneliness in older people is linked to faster decline in physical and mental health.

In fact one study found a 64% increased chance of developing clinical dementia in people who had experienced loneliness. What is difficult to know, is whether loneliness causes preventable dementia, or whether being lonely simply increases the likelihood of doing things that have the same knock on effect. Drinking, smoking, and being less physically active are known to contribute towards the chance of developing dementia, but then again, they're also things that lonely people tend to do more.



5 10% of people aged 65 and over say they feel lonely always or often. For 80 year olds this shoots up to 46%.

Half of all older people say the television is their main company. That's around 20,000 People in Tameside. For older people who are feeling isolated there's Silverline, a dedicated helpline with a friendly voice just a phone call away 0800 4 70 80 90



6 Feeling lonely can lead to choices that are bad for health. Lonely people can be more vulnerable to alcohol problems and are more likely to be smokers.

They are also less likely to take physical activity or have a good diet. These lifestyle choices can have a knock on effect on health through the associated conditions such as diabetes, and in severe cases, cancers, chronic heart disease and vascular dementia. There are some good ways to cope with loneliness that are less damaging to health.



7 Some people are more likely to experience loneliness than others because of their circumstances.

For example, 56% of unpaid Carers, that is someone who looks after a sick, elderly or disabled friend or family member, reported not having as much social contact with other people as they'd like.



9 Loneliness can occur at any time in life, after a house move, when you have a new baby for example, or it is most often linked to older people. This is because there can be multiple sets of circumstances that contribute to loneliness as we age.

Older people whose children have grown up and moved out, and whose spouses have passed away may find themselves living alone for the first time. This can mean they start to experience loneliness as their lives become less busy. Around half of people aged 75 and over live alone. Three quarters of them will be lonely, so that's around 6000 people in Tameside. The proportion of older people in our community is increasing, so the number of people who are lonely is going to rise in the coming years.



10 Loneliness is a growing epidemic, but the silver lining to this health problem is that it doesn't take doctors, nurses and hoards of cash to fix it.

The cure for loneliness is you. Everybody can do something about it, whether you are lonely yourself, or want to reach to someone else who is lonely. Why not see what you can do to fight loneliness in Tameside?



8 Depression, low social interaction and loneliness can be a predictor of suicide in older people.

Men tend to speak less about their feelings than women. Bottling loneliness up can make the situation feel harder to manage, and in the extreme has been linked to higher suicide rates in men than women. Try talking about loneliness with male friends and relatives to help break the stigma. A simple conversation could be a lifeline.



11 One in four older people say they don't have a friend or relative to turn to if they need somebody. It's really important that we reach out to lonely people, and there are plenty of opportunities to befriend an older person in Tameside. Age UK say, nobody should have nobody. Could you be somebody's somebody?

